

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/education/orl-college0706sep07,0,7133236.story?coll=orl-home-headlines>

# **Report: Uneducated kids imperil state growth**

## **Most Florida youths skip college and can't fill jobs of boomers, a study warns.**

Dave Weber  
Sentinel Staff Writer

September 7, 2006

A generation of poorly educated children unlikely to get college degrees threatens Florida's ability to create a competitive work force and may weaken the state's economy, a new report being released today says.

Many Florida students are not academically prepared for college, most will not attend and many who do will struggle to pay, says the nonpartisan National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education in Washington.

Florida has one of the lowest high-school graduation rates in the country, with only 56 percent of students completing high school in four years, according to the center's latest assessment, released every other year.

Less than a third go to college, with fewer earning degrees, the report says.

With well-educated baby boomers starting to reach retirement age, the rising Florida generation is unprepared to fill vacant positions -- or new jobs that could be attracted to a better-educated state, the report says.

"Our future educational and economic leadership is in jeopardy if the nation's young population -- those already in the work force and those still in the educational pipeline -- do not keep pace" in education, said Patrick Callan, president of the National Center.

State education officials Wednesday were quick to dispute findings of the report, which was to be released this morning during a news conference attended by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

The Florida Department of Education said its calculation points to a 72 percent high-school graduation rate -- 13 percentage points higher than the report found.

"But are we content with 72 percent? Absolutely not," said Cathy Schroeder, FDOE spokeswoman.

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education is an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes education beyond high school. The U.S. Department of Education is taking part in release of the report to emphasize the need for affordable and accessible college education.

Measuring Up 2006: The National Report Card on Higher Education is critical of college opportunities in most states. The report gives 43 states, including Florida, F's for college affordability, up from 36 two years ago.

The report cited the big bill that Florida's low- and middle-income students face for college, even with financial aid and state scholarships.

According to the center, a low-income family might have to use as much as 40 percent of its cash for college expenses, even after financial aid, and Florida undergraduate students borrow \$3,291 on average each year.

State officials question the criticism on college costs.

"Florida's public universities charge the lowest tuition and fees in the nation, and almost half of all students in the State University System enjoy Bright Futures, the state-sponsored scholarship. That makes it hard to understand how Florida could get an F for affordability," said Bill Edmonds, spokesman for the university system.

The study found several areas in which Florida made progress getting students into -- and through -- college. The positives include a high number of students who return for a second year and a smaller gap between minority and white students who complete college programs.

But the report finds other shortcomings, including poor preparation of students for college and the low number of students who attend: about 30 percent of 19-year-olds. That compares with 53 percent in Minnesota and other top states.

Fewer still earn college degrees. Only 52 percent of Florida college students got a bachelor's degree within six years of starting. Even in the best states, only 64 percent completed college, the report noted, citing a need to improve nationwide.

Florida also is cited as one of only two states where the proportion of high-school students taking upper-level science courses has declined in the past 12 years, the study found. Black students in ninth and 12th grades are only three-quarters as likely as whites to take upper-level math and science courses, the report says.

State officials said new legislation approved last spring will require four instead of three math courses for high-school graduation, starting with ninth-graders next year. Algebra I

also will be offered in middle schools to give students a head start on taking more and harder math courses in high school, they said.

Local educators are at odds about the reports' findings. Some agree with its assessments, while others say it appears off base. As on the state level, lack of college affordability especially is disputed.

"If you are a Florida student today and you want to go to college, you can," said Lynn Ney, a guidance counselor at Winter Springs High School in Seminole County.

Even without state or other scholarships, which are widely available to minority students, the cost of college in Florida is low, Ney said.

But the report card on higher education indicates that Florida families on average must spend a quarter of their income to send a child to a community college or four-year public university.

Verdell Pugh Horne, a reading teacher at Seminole High School in Sanford and chairman of the trustees at Seminole Community College, said low incomes in Florida undercut the benefits of low tuition.

"Someone making \$20,000 a year can hardly feed their family, let alone pay for college," Horne said.

*Dave Weber can be reached at 407-320-0915 or [dweber@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:dweber@orlandosentinel.com).*

*Copyright © 2006, [Orlando Sentinel](#) / [Get home delivery - up to 50% off](#)*